

- * Gayle Porter
- * National Alliance of Black Feminists
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- * by phone, Washington, D.C.

K: The last time we talked we discussed a bit how you got involved with the NABF and you told me about being a school counselor and there being some issues of discrimination with the children going to the magnet schools.

G: That's correct.

K: Okay, we covered that. I wanted to ask if you belonged to any other organizations before you were involved with the NABF.

G: Not any other feminist organizations. Not in a formal way.

K: Any other civil rights or---

G: Well, I've always been a member of the NAACP. I've always participated in voter rights campaigns, but on a much more informal and low-level way than I did once I got into the National Alliance.

K: Okay, do you feel like that prepared you to do the work in the National Alliance.

G: No. I think what prepared me to do the work in the National Alliance was that, one, I had always been interested in works by and about women, certainly Black women. I had always been involved in activities and reading about civil rights issues as they pertain particularly to African Americans, but just to people in general. I think my focus has always been around poor and minority people and the work that I did in terms of children, I always worked in settings where the children were poor and minority kids. Mostly African American, but quite a few Hispanic children as well. So I think that prepared me more in terms of just as a cognitive set. Now that habit of voting and going into neighborhoods and, you know, asking people, "Have you voted yet?" that certainly helped me to be in that activist---even more in that kind of activist political arena. But probably the readings more than anything shaped my behavior, my later behavior [what readings?].

K: And how long did you participate in the NBFO. You said you joined in about June or July of 1976.

G: Well, until I left in '82.

K: Now I saw something about you in the newsletters being accepted to graduate school?

G: That's right. Well, I had a master's, but I went back to get my doctorate in clinical psych. That was in the late '70s.

K: But you were able to stay involved?

G: Well, not at the same level, but I definitely stayed involved. Yeah, in fact, I was very involved.

K: Okay. I wanted to clarify some questions I had about the organization of the group and the role that you played in it. So, the first question is were people elected to the different positions or selected by consensus?

G: I think it was probably more a selection by consensus.

K: So that would mean that Brenda Eichelberger was selected by whom?

G: Well, that was a little bit different because she was one of the original founders of the National Alliance of Black Feminists, which was an off-shoot of a Black feminist organization that had started, I think, in

New York. And Brenda was the catalyst with one or two other people behind it developing in Chicago. And there was a consensus among those original people that Brenda would be the Executive Director.

K: So was there any problem with that with the general body?

G: Oh, no. And at that time it was so small. I mean, this was truly a very, very, very neophyte organization and to some extent a new idea with the term feminist in the Black community. And although we had always had women who were activists, the whole notion of being an activist or Black women---now Sojourner made the statement, but that was not the focus for most Black women who were active. It was much more directed towards racial issues.

K: By saying it's a neophyte organization do you mean that there was a small percentage of the overall membership that was active on a weekly basis?

G: Oh, there was a very small percentage of Black women period who were active at any level [laughter]. When I joined it was still a very small group of people who were involved and then of that small group of people there was a smaller group that was involved on a consistent basis.

K: So, how many would you say were involved when you first joined?

G: Well, I would say probably on a consistent basis there were maybe ten. Now at that point they had opened an office, they were starting to reach out to other women in the community, but it was small.

K: So do you recall the events being well-attended, like the forums on Black male/female relationships and the Alternative School?

G: Well, I think that was one of the first ventures that really started to attract a number of people.

[break]

K: You were talking about the Alternative School and the attendance.

G: Right. I think that that event and the weekly consciousness-raising sessions were probably the two events that started really getting information out to the general Black community and attracting more and more Black women, in particular, but also it was some Black men. So that events like that were, I think, pivotal.

K: And men could be affiliates, right?

G: Right.

K: So do you recall about how many were affiliates?

G: No, but I have---one of my very favorite stories is of a Black man---at that time, I think I was the chairperson then---and I was giving the consciousness-raising on Saturday afternoons at the office. And this Black man came in with his daughter who was only five years old. And we told him, of course, that we were very happy to see him, but neither he nor his daughter would be able to participate in the consciousness-raising and he said, "Oh, I know that." He said, "I'm here to sign her up. I want to buy her a lifetime membership." And so we said, "Well, great." And, you know, we asked him why. He said, "Because I want her to be a strong, assertive Black woman. I don't want her to feel that she has to walk behind any man, no matter what color. And I want her to get the kind of support that I think your organization can give." So we said, "That's wonderful."

So I asked him, "Well, is her mother alive?" He said, "Oh yeah." I said, "Are you two together?" He said, "Oh, of course." So I said, "Well, what about her." He said, "Oh, no." He said, "I don't want her joining something like this." He said, "First of all, I'm not saying that you or any of the other women that I'm

talking to now are 'like that'." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "You know, gay. But there could be some gay women in here." He said, "And my wife's the kind, some gay woman might take her away from me." [laughter]

So he only wanted this child and he signed her up. He bought a life membership for this child. It was fascinating.

So we had a group of Black males and white males who provided support. I mean, they were a minority, but we did have some.

K: So you mean support as far as attending events and paying dues?

G: Mostly paying dues and attending some of the events.

K: You said that at one point---did you have another role besides chairperson in the organization?

G: Well, as chairperson I did a number of things. I would go and speak at various meetings. I would do the consciousness-raising. I led those sessions and organized that on the weekends. You know, I was responsible for helping to plan and develop various events. We had a big health conference in '77 and I was involved in that. So whatever needed to be done, but there were just certain administrative things that I definitely took responsibility for in terms of a lot of the program planning and making sure that that happened.

K: Where did the money come from besides dues?

G: Donations. We had a number of people who would donate money. Our affiliates who couldn't be full members would be affiliates. And then some events that we had we would charge usually a nominal fee, but it was definitely a shoe-string operation with a lot of the major money coming from those who were primary members.

K: What role did the Advisory Board play?

G: I think to, you know, just keep us informed about what was needed in terms of community workshops and outreach. Also to help with fundraising and suggestions for potential sources of monies through grants and other things like that. They were---some of the members were part of the Advisory Board and there were some outside people who were on the Advisory Board, but they really functioned more to really just give recommendations, suggestions to help with fundraising. If there were grant opportunities that required that you had an Advisory Board, they filled that function.

K: Were people invited to sit on the Board or how did they come to be there?

G: They were invited to sit on the Board because we really wanted to get a cross-section of people in the community.

K: So was it that you would have meetings of the Advisory Board or were they just people that you could call on?

G: No, we would have some meetings. We had probably---maybe three or four meetings a year. That part is fuzzier for me.

K: And as far as---you mentioned grants---do you recall any sources of grants that NABF applied for and got?

G: I know we did, but I don't think there was anything major. I think we did get a small grant, but that is gone.

K: I saw that you had also consultants. Did they play the same purpose? The same role as the Advisory Board?

G: Um-hm. They would---and they were also people, for instance, when we had our health fair, who were not active members, but if we needed a physician to come in and do a workshop for us. Or we needed someone---an accountant to help us plan a workshop on how do you do financial planning for yourself---so that they were not people who were active members necessarily and sometimes they were affiliates, but they would definitely help us in terms of just information.

K: So lots of times they worked on special projects then?

G: Exactly.

K: So, you mentioned going on speaking engagements. Was there a speaker's bureau or did you and Brenda do that or whoever volunteered?

G: Well, there wasn't---I guess there was a speaker's bureau. We did have that because we had different people who had different areas of expertise. I think probably the bulk of the speaking after a while was done by Brenda and myself, but we had other people who would go and speak to various organizations because, you know, at one point we were getting a lot of requests for speakers. And so different members would provide that resource.

K: Right. And were the speakers paid, generally, an honorarium for speaking?

G: Sometimes yes, sometimes no. I mean, certainly any of the money---I don't know of anybody who didn't give it back to the organization.

K: So all of it would go back or maybe they might pay their transportation costs?

G: Maybe, but I think---I know for myself and Brenda and C.A.---most of the people, all of the money went back into the pot.

K: So, those were my more nuts and bolts questions. There are more general questions. What events stand out for you from your time with NABF?

G: Probably two that I think were, for me, extremely important and useful. One, the weekly consciousness-raising groups, I think did what we hoped they would do. That they changed or expanded the consciousness of women about their right and responsibility to take care of themselves and that that meant automatically that you would be in a better position to take care of people whom you loved and cared about, the other women, men in your lives, as well as younger and older people. And to be involved in activities that would help your community---I mean, I'm talking now about the African American community, specifically, but the general community that we all lived in. And that was wonderful because to see women really taking the time to explore how they made the decisions and why they made the decisions that we make was a growing experience for me.

And I think the health fair, that that was a wonderful event that brought together a number of people who really shared expertise in a variety of areas.

K: Is that an annual events or did you have it one time?

G: We had it, I think twice, but the first one---just as an event because it was a lot of hard work, but we really managed to pull it off and it was quite successful.

K: Lots of community attendance?

G: Um-hm.

K: Okay. Great. Do you recall any ideological disputes within the organization among the membership?

G: Probably there were that had to do with how much affiliation would there be with white feminist groups. How much affiliation would there be with lesbian groups? How many events would we have where we would bring our male partners or friends or husbands or brothers or sons? But I would say the most intense discussions were I think at times with the level of affiliation with white feminist groups.

K: So were there---was it just a general discussion or did certain events come up where, say maybe NOW wanted you to do something with them or the Chicago Women's Liberation Union or something?

G: Well, what I can remember---and I don't remember all of the organizations involved---was that there was going to be a big voter's registration push and I can recall at one of our meeting where one of the white groups volunteered to go into Black churches to help register Black people. And I said, "I mean, this to me would be a poor use of your time since you haven't even been able to persuade enough white women to pressure a presidential candidate into selecting a white woman to be a vice-president. And you're the largest group in the country." So there could be that kind of, I mean for me, just an arrogance, but at the same time there were definite areas of such strong agreement and support, you know, for both causes. For making change in the white community, as well as making change in the Black community. But I think some members were more or less comfortable with that.

K: So do you feel like the group came down on one side or the other over the long range?

G: I think that what was clear---and since the consensus was that we would affiliate where we could, but that it was going to be clear that this was a Black feminist organization, but we were certainly not going to set up an arbitrary or capricious type of relationship with them that was adversarial. We're not going to fight simply because they were white. Nor were we going to unite just because they were a feminist organization. That there were areas of strong agreement and where we could support each other. And then there were areas where there were different agendas and we were going to pursue the agenda that we needed to.

K: A lot of groups encountered having sort of a gay/straight split within the organization. Do you feel like NABF had to deal with that at all?

G: I don't really think so. There were women in the organization who were gay. There were women in the organization who were heterosexual and there were women in the organization who were bisexual. But I think that over time---and to my fantasy is that in the initial stages there had to be some working through that this was not a dating service or some gay women who got involved, you know, for different reasons, but also saw this as a potential place for women who would hopefully be more comfortable looking at difference as just that---you know, not in a homophobic way. And then there was education for women who had religious feelings about homosexuality that in this organization there were going to be gay women, but they didn't have to feel that they had to date them or that they had to be courted. But that worked out, I think, pretty well. I mean, the need was so great to have a place where as a woman, you could be accepted and that you would have an opportunity to explore how you made decisions and to do that with other sisters. I think that tended to be the dominate thing and these other issues were worked out. Because the mission statement was very clear that all women were accepted, but no woman was going to be harassed within the organization.

K: Now I want to ask you a question that came up just looking over the NABF documents about that. Cause it---most of them didn't use the word lesbian or gay. They said, you know, "We advocate the right of every woman to pursue the 'lifestyle' that she chooses." So was that what that was alluding to?

G: Exactly.

K: Okay. And the education that took place for women who might have a problem with homosexuality based on religion. Was that a formal education or workshops?

G: Both. Informal and formal. Again, on event that stands out in my mind was we were talking about the difficulty that some women had saying, "I love you" to each other. And that they would say it to their male partners but could often not say it to a woman. And in our community that often it was more difficult as a community to verbally express affection than to show it in some non-verbal ways. And so we went around the room and we talked about who had said to a woman, a non-relative, "I love you." And I guess there were, out of the ten, twelve women, there were several women who had said it to a friend. You know, we're talking about within the last two weeks. And so then this one woman said, "Oh, I say it everyday." And everybody said, "Oh, god. That's great." And she said, "Oh, I say it the first thing in the morning." And so one of the women said, "Well, how did you reach that point?" She said, "Well, I've been doing that with this person for at least nine or ten years." So she said, "That's wonderful. How did you two agree?" She said, "Well, we're lovers." So everybody---'cause this woman was the most non-stereotypic gay woman and that's what also surfaced was there was such a stereotype about what a gay woman looked like and this woman was, in the most traditional way, "the pretty Black woman." And so this other woman said, "You're gay?" She said, "All my life." I mean it was just a wonderful place to start doing this kind of informal education, but it lead us to having a formal workshop around the stereotypes that we have within our community.

K: So that was during a meeting or something?

G: Right. That was during a consciousness-raising session.

K: Let's see. How do you think NABF was viewed by other organizations? By either civil rights organizations in the area or other feminist organizations?

G: Well, in terms of white organizations, let me start there. I think it was viewed as a positive. I mean, they certainly were not attracting Black women and I think that at their best, their leaders wanted to see feminism accepted as a part of a woman's life without it being perceived as a threat to any other allegiances; but just as a way for women to start reinterpreting the things that happen to them and to have a whole different cognitive set about that. I think for some organizations when it became clear that there was going to be an Alliance, a true partnership---if there was going to be any Alliance, I'm certain some of the members had some difficulty with that. But others accepted it.

I think with the civil rights organizations because we were clearly so involved in being Black women, you know, that it was not for us about---I'm sure that for some it was perceived as being a threat---some of the members. But we were Black Women, first and foremost, what we were saying was that we weren't going to choose between being Black first or women first. That our life space was to look at ourselves was to look at ourselves as Black Women. So, for the most part, I don't think there was any---I don't remember, let me just say that, there being any major struggles along that line. But there was some suspiciousness and probably more of a concern about whether or not there would be a disproportionate number of gay women, which is just what so many of them labeled all white women who were in feminist organizations.

K: I think I have a pretty good grasp from the papers I have what kind of coalition work you did, so I'll skip that one. Were you aware of any other Black women's organizations that were active around the same time period?

G: Not that were feminists and not in Chicago. But there were certainly many other Black women's organizations.

K: Are you thinking of, like, the National Council of Negro Women?

G: Um-hm.

K: What do you think, overall, NABF accomplished? Well, I can speak for myself and certainly based on what I saw happen with the other women who were involved was a frame of reference for viewing yourself in terms of how you say the world. I mean, I am a Black Feminist and that is a conscious and, at this point,

a habitual way of looking at the world. And, so, it provided me with a way of assessing issues that I didn't have in quite that way before. So when I look at the world now, I look at it in terms of how does this space support the development of women? What is it doing to insure that women have opportunities and for me--- I mean, I'm a child person---and it means I'm as invested in how does it support males growing up feeling that they neither have to be inappropriately supportive and protective of women nor do they have to be afraid and aggressively attacking of women. But a way to see women both as appropriate supports of them and as people whom they support. And I think to feel comfortable really looking at life in an assertive manner. That it gave the cognitive and behavioral tools to do that because assertion training was a major component of all of the work that we did. So we were not only teaching women, and the men who came to the meetings, a way of looking at the world cognitively, but giving them the behavioral tools to do that. So, and those were two probably of the most well-attended sessions, were the weekly sessions of consciousness-raising and assertion training.

K: Were there any consciousness-raising sessions for Black men?

G: Oh, sure. Oh, yeah. And, in fact, I gave talks in women and men's presence.

K: Perhaps that accounts for a lot of the correspondence from prison that I saw at the archive?

G: Oh, yeah.

K: Do you remember a woman by the name of Cassandra Peten? From what I could gather, it was a case where she was imprisoned for killing her husband who battered her. I was trying to just see if you recalled how that case turned out because I saw that NABF sent money for her defense.

G: I don't remember. I think what happened---she escaped from prison and then she was recaptured. I think eventually she was released. But she was one of the early cases of the Battered Women's Syndrome. I don't even know if they used that phrase at that point, but that was the defense.

K: Right. And do you remember something called the Black Women's Arts Alliance? Were you a part of that?

G: I think so. Yeah.

K: I believe it came out of the Black women's conference.

G: What year?

K: Let me look in my file folder. There's not a date on here, but I assume it came out of the conference. It was probably about 1978 when it got off the ground.

G: Yeah. I'm sure---it's very fuzzy for me, but if it was during---anytime from '77---certainly '77 to '82 then I would have had some involvement with it.

K: And do you remember the Black Women's Conference that happened in 1977?

G: Vaguely.

K: A lot of resolutions came out of it.

G: What month was it?

K: It was in October at the Midland Hotel.

G: I'm certain we were one of the sponsors of that.

K: Yeah. The main sponsor. "A Meeting of the Minds."

G: In fact, that was one of the conferences that we pulled together.

K: I was wondering if you recalled how---what was the follow-up with those resolutions?

G: Well, I think for some of them---see, I don't even remember all of the resolutions---but I think for some of them it probably led us to intensifying our work in terms of consciousness-raising, going out in the community, doing more assertion training, but I would have to see the resolutions.

K: So, did you leave the organization in '82 or did it fold?

G: Well, I left because I came to Washington to do my internship and I moved here. And then I think after that it just---not because of my leaving---but I think that was one of those critical places where, for a variety of reasons, different women who had been kind of the mainstay of the organization started having other things that they were involved with. It remained, I think a viable organization for a while afterwards, but I think some of the major people who were really active were getting older and I think it just started---I think Brenda got involved in some other activities in terms of "life activities" and did not have the time to continue at the level that she was operating at.

leadership moved on to other things (how do you generate new leadership?)

K: Right. Which seemed like 150% capacity.

G: Oh, yeah. 53%. A hundred percent. I mean she really---I said to her and I say when I think back on my own life and I think of the people who have made a significant difference in who I am today, Brenda is among the top ten of those people. She gave everything that she could.

K: So would you say that those are---let me just ask you because it's sort of a different question: why do you think the organization doesn't exist anymore?

G: Well, I think that probably like any organization that is in a way revolutionizing how a group thinks about itself, that you really have to have a very long-term idea of how involved you're going to be for how many years. I mean, I think even something like the National Negro Council, which was a very conservative---and I say that in positive way, not negative---organization, but it still took time for it to reach the level of prominence that it has today. And we're talking about an organization that has been going on and it had to almost have two leaders who stayed with it for, at this point, over sixty years. When you think about the fact that the Council has had only two leaders in its fifty-two, -three year history, that is a kind of long-term, "get off the ground-ness" that you need. And it was an organization that could attract more---I think a feminist organization in the Black community, especially with it being perceived at times as competing with the "most important issue" racism---and I definitely put that in quotes because at this point in my life I think sexism is a much older -ism and one that we are still grappling with in ways that just demonstrate its pervasiveness.

lack of long-range planning

But I think you really have to have that level of ten, fifteen, twenty-year commitment. You can't do it in five years, and I think that you have to have more than one person. I mean, you need a cadre of people who can support the leader and can give the leader support and keep on. I think I played a pivotal role. Again, I'm not saying that my leaving is what stopped the organization, but I think that I did play a major role in providing support so that it was more than just one or two people. You know, what you can do with a group of three or four is very different than if you've got one or two. So I think that at a very important point some key people were not available to keep the organization going.

cadre of people to support the leader

K: How would you say---do you think finances played a part in that also?

G: Oh, of course because, I mean, I was a counselor and although I was certainly in no way---anything close to being wealthy, I was solvent and I contributed a lot of money. So that was another piece. I mean, once I became a full-time student, my money dropped off and so it---I think, again, there were a couple of things that happened. But I think just for an organization like that one, which is always going to require a

lot more work because you're really having to fight harder than if you just say we have a group of women who are going to be involved in promoting the interests of the race and women, as opposed to an organization that has as its mission to have women re-look at, redefine themselves. Yeah, that's more threatening.

more difficult to have org of women in redefinition than self-promotion

K: It's big undertaking. So, do you happen to know the current whereabouts of any other members?

G: No, I really don't. I probably have an address book that has some names. I certainly know other people who joined, but not at the level of activity that we had. And the one other person whom I know is in South Africa: Monica Stewart, was a very active member.

K: Does she live there now?

G: But all the other women I know and know there whereabouts, they really had much more of an important, but more peripheral role.

K: So more rank-and-file maybe?

G: People who were consultants.

K: Do you have any NABF documentation or photos or anything in your possession?

G: I don't know. I might have an Ebony that I think Brenda and I were in? I might have—I certainly have some of the assertion training materials that we used. I probably have some things like that.

K: Brenda archived a lot of stuff, so I was able to get a lot of that, but I'm just thinking ahead. If you happen to have any photos that you come across, let me know. So is there anything that you'd like to add?

G: Well, only that I think it's one of the most significant periods of my life and I'm eternally grateful to the goddess and Jesus and God and everybody who was involved. And to Brenda. And to all of the women who I've met as a result [end of side one]

[side two] helped change my life and the lives of other women. As I've said, I feel particularly grateful to Brenda; that she had the tenacity to really struggle to make it a living entity.

K: Do you feel like that was the general consensus? More like gratitude to her for doing that work moreso than that she was taking over the organization? I mean, it's hard to take over something if you help found it.

G: You know, I can only say from my perspective. I'm sure that during the course of the organization—we fought because power and intimacy are an integral part of any group where you're always struggling to balance between the two and there's no question. There would be times I would argue with Brenda about, you know, "That isn't a decision you can make. That's a decision the group has to make." And there would be other times when it would be clear to me that what she was saying made the most sense and, of course, I can certainly get into my space of, "Well, this is how I think it ought to be done." But I think that maybe there were people who felt that she could be autocratic or demanding, but I would suspect that overall there's nobody—or very few people who would not say that Brenda wasn't the mainstay and that it was her dedication and her intensity which allowed the organization to get off the ground and to provide a space for other women to come in and to take some time to look at themselves. So, I mean, we got along very well, but we certainly did not always agree and I suspect that her style was maybe easier for some people than for others. But I think that the women who were in it saw what she was trying to do and that it was not just trying to gain her little fifteen minutes of fame, but that she really was focused...and if she got fifteen minutes of fame, she might like that, too! But that she really wanted to make a difference and she did.

tensions around leadership outweighed by Eric's dedication

K: Great. That was something I wanted to get some perspective on.
[end of interview]